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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [CU](#) [MX](#) [BR](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: FRANCE PLEDGES CAUTION ON CUBA, LAMENTS MISFIRE ON
MEXICO TRIP

REF: 2008 PARIS 2226

Classified By: POL MC Kathleen H. Allegrone for reasons 1.4 (B & D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: President Sarkozy appointed former Socialist Minister Jack Lang to be Special Envoy on Cuba in order to drive forward French and EU dialogue with Cuba but also, on the domestic front, as outreach to a prominent French opposition party member, according to French Presidential Advisor for the Americas Damien Loras in a March 17 meeting with POL MC. France did not aspire to mediate between Cuba and the U.S. Although Havana had invited Sarkozy to visit, there were no such plans in play, Loras insisted; neither would Paris host a Cuban Presidential visit. Lang came away from meetings February 25 in Havana with Raul Castro and then-Foreign Minister Perez Roque believing that the GOC, while heartened by the change of administration in Washington, nonetheless doubts a shift in U.S.-Cuba policy is likely. In a brief assessment of Sarkozy's March 9 trip to Mexico, Loras regretted the otherwise routine visit had misfired with the Mexican public due to controversy over the possible extradition of a French national convicted as an accomplice to kidnapping. END SUMMARY.

Socialist Jack Lang as Special Envoy to Cuba

¶2. (C) Presidential Advisor Damian Loras played down the significance of a French Special Envoy for Cuba during a March 17 meeting with Pol M/C and poloff (notetaker). Domestic French politics were a primary consideration in the appointment of former French Socialist Minister of Culture Lang, with Sarkozy eager to appropriate the prominent figure of the Left to his administration. Equally important, Loras argued, was the desire for a renewal of French and EU dialogue with Cuba (ref). "Since (France) has historically had strong relations with Cuba, why should we sit on the sidelines since the EU restrictions were lifted," Loras commented. Other than Spain and France, Cuba lacked strong supporters within the EU. Past EU policies aimed at marginalizing the Castro regime had "failed," he commented, advocating a policy of engagement with continued focus on human rights and democracy.

Lang not to mediate between U.S. and Cuba

¶3. (C) Contrary to public suggestions by Lang that France could help mediate between Washington and Havana, France did not aspire to serve as a "go-between," Loras insisted. He hoped nonetheless for positive moves by Cuba on human rights and freedom of the press and speech that could help unblock U.S.-Cuban relations. Loras acknowledged that Havana had invited Sarkozy to visit, but there were no such plans in the offing; neither would Paris host a Cuban Presidential visit. That said, Lang would return to Cuba in the near future, focusing chiefly on cultural and educational exchanges. (Note: France still operates one of the only remaining foreign cultural centers in Cuba, the Alliance Francaise.)

¶4. (C) Lang came away from meetings February 25 in Havana with Raul Castro and then-Foreign Minister Perez Roque believing that the GOC, while heartened by the change of administration in Washington, nonetheless doubts a shift in U.S.-Cuba policy is likely. Roque, who met with Lang the day before his dismissal, said the new U.S. President was the first in 50 years with a credible chance to change U.S. policy towards Cuba. Nonetheless, Havana interlocutors believed there were significant obstacles within the U.S. Government to change. The Cubans continue to believe the ball is in the U.S. court, said Loras, noting it was illogical, but nonetheless their position. Lang, for his part, had concluded that the Havana regime was risk-averse, concerned with self-preservation, and thus leery of a process with the U.S. that could involve Cuban concessions.

¶5. (C) The GOC sought to link unrelated matters to moving forward with the U.S. For example, they seemed to be trying to link an agreement with the U.S. to a prisoner exchange, an idea the French firmly stated was a "non-starter." "We warned (the GOC) but we're sure they'll put it forward anyway." The GOC also wants Cuba removed from the U.S. lists of nations that support terrorism and trafficking in persons.

¶6. (C) While the GOC was largely resistant to change, the Cuban Army was already making preparations. The military controls the tourism industry, Loras emphasized, and had already asked permission to build a new marina to host up to

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1,200 ships. They are preparing for future interest from a U.S. market, Loras judged, since there was no equivalent demand within the EU. "The Army is already looking north and preparing for change," he said.

France-Brazilian Pressure?

¶7. (C) Elaborating next steps, Loras suggested concerned allies, naming Brazil specifically, could foster a strong dynamic of change for Cuba. "Carrots" are now needed, said Loras, and those carrots should properly come from the U.S., though not necessarily in the public domain. In French exchanges with Brazil, including President Lula, there is talk of how to influence Cuba. Lula, in the French view, has unique clout with Havana.

Laments Misfires on Mexico Trip

¶8. (C) President Sarkozy's March 9 trip to Mexico was complicated by a Mexican public outcry at France's efforts to seek the extradition of French national Florence Cassez. (Note: Cassez is currently serving a 60-year sentence in a Mexican prison for her role in the kidnapping of three Mexican nationals in 2006. She contests the verdict and the case has generated some sympathy among the French public and media.) Loras admitted the French delegation had sought to negotiate the extradition on the margins of the visit, but the Mexican press got hold of the story and the Mexican public reaction was vehement. The trip's objectives were otherwise routine, showcasing Franco-Mexican commercial and cultural ties. All investment projects were on hold, however, given the crippling impact on Mexico of the global financial crisis, Loras said, while declining to specify details of any pending transactions.

¶9. (C) COMMENT: However the French Presidential diplomatic staff may try to define and narrow Lang's mandate, we will need to watch if this flamboyant Socialist figure stays in the box. Lang's appointment serves Sarkozy's continued personal efforts to co-opt Socialist Party (PS) luminaries

into his fold. Like FM Bernard Kouchner, also formerly a Socialist by political affiliation, Lang, a widely popular former Culture Minister under Mitterand, actually voted for Sarkozy's Socialist opponent Segolene Royal in the 2007 presidential elections. END COMMENT.

PEKALA